



# < Awash In Social Media, Cops Still Need The Public To Detect Threats

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KELLY MCEVERS, HOST:

Here's a question. What would you do if you saw a tweet from somebody threatening to shoot schoolchildren? You'd call the police, right? But what if the tweet was from an anonymous person in an unknown location? NPR's Martin Kaste has the story of how one man reacted to this scenario.

MARTIN KASTE, BYLINE: On Valentine's Day weekend, Jonathan Hutson found himself exchanging tweets with somebody unpleasant, a Holocaust-denying anti-Semite by the look of things. Then Hutson looked up the person's earlier tweets.

JONATHAN HUTSON: This guy was tweeting about shooting up a school. He said that he wanted to execute 30-plus grade school kids.

KASTE: So Hutson decided to draw the person out to see if the threats were real.

HUTSON: Then he tweeted to me after that and said, where do your kids go to school? And that made my blood run cold and, as a dad, made me want to stay up all night long and do everything possible to help law enforcement catch him.

KASTE: He called the FBI, but the agent on duty didn't really get Twitter. So Hutson kept at it himself, trying to figure out the tweeter's location. At this point, you should know that Hutson is a former reporter who now works as a spokesman for the Brady Campaign, the anti-gun violence group based in Washington. So he knows something about digging, and he knows what it takes to get people's attention.

HUTSON: I has assembled a tick-tock timeline of what he had tweeted, when he had tweeted, along with, you know, a profile of his pattern of life.

KASTE: Hutson guessed that the tweeter lived in Linn County, Ore., and he called the Sheriff's office there. Paul Timm is the captain of detectives.

PAUL TIMM: We started looking at it and said it doesn't sound like a guy we know or that is even in our County.

KASTE: It turns out Hutson guessed wrong on the location, but the Sheriff's office in Oregon was still willing to subpoena Twitter for the account's IP address, and that led, eventually, to Kalispell, Mont., and a 28-year-old snowboarder named David Lenio. Police there arrested him about two days after Hutson first started tracking him. The police chief in Kalispell is Roger Nasset.

ROGER NASSET: We got two search warrants. One of the search warrants retrieved two rifles, and another search located a handgun.

KASTE: Back in Washington, Jonathan Hutson was pleased with his decision to engage with the anonymous tweeter. But was it really the right thing to do?

JAMES FOX: Well, in this case, things look like they turned out well from having engaged this man. But there is a risk.

KASTE: James Fox is a criminologist at Northeastern University in Boston.

FOX: There is a risk of reinforcing someone's point of view. If they're spouting out threats and someone else is listening, it can actually embolden them.

KASTE: There's also the problem of judging a threat from afar. Brian Van Brunt is the president of the National Behavioral Intervention Team Association. It's an organization that teaches campuses and workplaces how to head off violence such as mass shootings. He trains people to look for the signs that a threat is serious. One sign is specificity.

BRIAN VAN BRUNT: First off, if there's a fixation and focus on target. We also pay attention to action and time imperative. We're very interested in understanding, is there a time or an event that's occurring.

KASTE: Specifics like that were absent to the Lenio case, but Van Brunt still thinks Hutson was right when he tracked the threat down. People may think that there's some government entity like the NSA or FBI scanning social media for domestic threats like this, but Van Brunt says he hasn't seen any sign of that.

VAN BRUNT: It's much more of a fishing net with multiple holes. We are lucky when we discover something in my opinion.

KASTE: Some colleges and police departments are now starting to use software that scans social media for local threats. But in practice, most tips still come from members of the public who see a threat online and call it in, sometimes from across the country.  
Martin Kaste, NPR News.

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